

Surrender of Chapo's godson changes Sinaloa's gruesome drug war



By **Duncan Tucker** Aug 2, 2017



Infamous drug lords rarely hand themselves over to the U.S. government voluntarily. But that's precisely what Dámaso López Serrano, the godson of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, did after walking through the border crossing at Calexico, California, last Wednesday morning.

The U.S. government has not commented on his arrest or what charges he might face following his surrender, but the timing isn't entirely surprising, say security analysts familiar with Mexico's violent drug war.

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López Serrano's sudden surrender comes three months after the capture of his father, Dámaso López Nuñez, and amid a series of high-profile losses in the father-son duo's bloody war with Guzmán's sons for control of his criminal empire. Having grown increasingly isolated after his father's arrest, analysts believe López Serrano likely cut a deal to help prosecutors convict his godfather Guzmán, who faces trial in New York's Eastern District court in April.

Nicknamed "Mini Lic," López Serrano is known throughout Mexico as a flamboyant playboy who led a group of young cartel assassins called the Anthrax squad. He is famed for flaunting his exotic pets and gold-plated firearms on Instagram and is the

subject of a *narcocorrido* anthem that has been viewed over 213 million times on YouTube.

His father, known as “El Licenciado,” served as Guzmán’s right-hand man until the Sinaloa cartel boss was captured last year and extradited to the United States in January. Sensing opportunity, the pair betrayed their former benefactor and launched an audacious bid for power.

They were accused of briefly kidnapping Guzmán’s sons Iván and Alfredo last summer and leading them into a near-fatal ambush in February, but overplayed their hand when López Nuñez inadvertently hired a government informant to wage cyber-warfare against them. That mistake led to his arrest in May, leaving Mini Lic vulnerable against the Guzmán clan.

Mexico’s murder rate soared to a record high as the two rival factions turned Sinaloa into their battleground.

López Serrano’s escape to to the border city of Mexicali in Baja California came weeks after the Guzmán brothers, known as “Los Chapitos,” reportedly torched his properties in Sinaloa. From there he crossed into Calexico and surrendered to Customs and Border Patrol agents.

Speculation immediately swirled in the Mexican press that López Serrano or his more experienced and influential father, who is being held in a maximum-security prison near Mexico City, had negotiated his surrender in a bid to protect the younger man.

“No Mexican *narco* would voluntarily turn himself in to the U.S. government without negotiating their terms,” noted Alejandro Hope, a prominent security expert.

“El Chapo’s sons appear to have prevailed”

Dr. Jesús Pérez, a researcher who specializes in investigating Mexican drug gangs, said López Serrano will likely provide information to support El Chapo’s prosecution and could even testify in some capacity at his trial in return for a reduced sentence or protected witness status.

“The U.S. government is focused on convicting El Chapo Guzmán. They want all the information they can get to ensure that he’s given a heavy sentence and that his criminal organization is dismantled,” Pérez said. “[López Serrano’s] importance to them pales in comparison with that of El Chapo.”

Despite Los Chapitos having seemingly defeated their closest rivals, analysts expect the violence in Sinaloa to continue at its relentless pace throughout the coming months, with opportunistic rivals like the upstart Jalisco New Generation cartel and

the remnants of the Beltrán Leyva organization challenging the Guzmán brothers for control of the region.

May and June brought the highest homicide numbers since records began 20 years ago, putting 2017 on course to be the most deadly year in Mexico's recent history. More than 200,000 people have been killed or disappeared since the government declared war on the cartels in late 2006.

Pérez warned that if López cooperates with U.S. authorities it could fuel further violence in Sinaloa. "When Osiel Cárdenas was extradited to the United States [in 2007] he gave up the entire structure of the Gulf cartel and especially [its former armed wing] the Zetas," he said. "This provoked a brutal wave of violence by the Zetas that badly weakened the Gulf cartel."

It is unclear what will happen in Sinaloa but Pérez said it would be premature for the Guzmán brothers to declare victory in the war for their father's legacy.

"El Chapo's sons appear to have prevailed," he noted, "but the advantage they have could become a weakness if López and his father provide information on their structure to the DEA."

Duncan Tucker is a freelance journalist based in Mexico.



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